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Star wars Battlefront has attractive elements but ultimately feels shallow and half-finished. *ELECTRONIC ARTS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Moments of shock and awe

Shallowness undermines Star Wars Battlefront

LOU KESTEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

There have been about 100 Star Wars video games released since 1977. You can count the great ones on one hand; many more have been junky cash-ins. Still, you can slap the Star Wars logo on something like Angry Birds and it will make money. And kid-oriented games like Lego Star Wars and Disney Infinity 3.0 provide lighthearted hijinks. Meanwhile, adult fans of honest-to-goodness space opera have more satisfying options like Starcraft and Mass Effect.

After Electronic Arts made a deal with Disney to produce more grown-up Star Wars games, some felt a new hope for their future. Alas, Star Wars Battlefront (for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, $79.99), will disappoint all but the most diehard Jedi wannabes with its uninspired recycling of scenarios we've already replayed too many times to count.

Want to fly an X-Wing through the canyons of Tatooine, or race a speeder bike through the forests of Endor? How about a chance to relive that famous battle on the ice planet Hoth — you know, the one with those giant four-legged robots? The planets look gorgeous — this is the prettiest Star Wars game ever — but there's a been-there-done-that feeling.

Battlefront eases you into the action with missions on each of these planets (plus the volcanic Sullust), which you can play solo or co-operatively.

But the real action is in online competition for up to 40 players, with nine multiplayer modes and 13 maps built in. Only one of those modes — Walker Assault, where the Empire has those big, lumbering robots — is remotely innovative. You can choose whether to fight for the Dark Side or the Light Side, and some scenarios let you play as a "hero": the Empire's Darth Vader, Boba Fett or Emperor Palpatine, or the Rebels' Luke Skywalker, Han Solo or Princess Leia. Any spoilers for The Force Awakens have been reserved for downloadable add-ons closer to the movie's release.

The battlefields do have an impressive scope, and there are moments of shock and awe as X-Wings and TIE Fighters criss-cross the skies while Darth Vader and his Stormtroopers plow through hapless rebels.

But your goals are the same as in so many other online shooters — collect kills, capture and defend map points — and all that beauty ultimately seems shallow. The foundations of a solid online combat franchise are here, but Star Wars Battlefront doesn't deliver the depth of more established shooters like Call of Duty.

DICE, the Swedish studio behind Battlefront, is best known for its Battlefield series of earth-bound war games. And while that experience would seem to make it ideal for this franchise — it is Star Wars, after all, not Star Diplomacy — its first trip to this galaxy feels half-finished.

Video game design hits rocky patch

DERRIK J. LANG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES The developers of Star Wars Battlefront got off to a rocky start when building a level based on the upcoming blockbuster The Force Awakens.

As the video game makers were constructing a virtual version of the sandy planet Jakku from the latest episode of the Star Wars saga, the team at Lucasfilm in San Francisco provided Stockholm-based studio DICE with a directive: Their rendition of Jakku needed fewer boulders to resemble its big-screen counterpart.

"We did comment on the rock formations," said Ada Duan, vice-president of digital business and franchise management at Lucasfilm.

"We wanted it to be more true to how the planet was being developed and what we'll be seeing in the film. It was a really unique experience because they were essentially creating Jakku at the same time as the filmmakers."

The new iteration of the multiplayer game, mostly takes place on worlds from the original film trilogy, such as Endor and Hoth. However, developer DICE and publisher Electronic Arts are unleashing a downloadable Battle of Jakku level two weeks ahead of the release of Star Wars: The Force Awakens on Dec. 18.

"We wanted to respect the look they created for Jakku, but at the same time, the Jakku that we're developing needed to facilitate gameplay," said Sigurlina Ingvarsdottir, senior producer at DICE.

"They're making a movie. We're making a game. Irrespective of how good the game looks, if the environment doesn't facilitate gameplay, it doesn't meet its purpose."

Star Wars Battlefront received input from the filmmakers who advised the game developers that their rendition of the planet Jakku wasn't reflective of the big-screen representation. *ELECTRONIC ARTS*

'Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible'

ZAPPA FROM C1

"History will be kind to Frank Zappa," Nagano once told me.

Zappa was an equal opportunity offender (a greatest hits album was titled, with delicious irony, Have I Offended Someone?). Thus he didn't buy the feminist charge of misogyny; he wrote far more songs lampooning male jerks than female jerks. He did admit to being a "slight misanthrope."

Don Menn, in the longest interview with Zappa (The Mother of All Interviews, from a special 1992 issue of Guitar Player, now on the web) asked Zappa what he considered his greatest weakness: "I just can't do normal stuff." Strength? "My sense of humour."

He got into music because he liked the dots on the score, wondering what they meant, what they could do. He was largely self-taught. He could not sing and play guitar at the same time.

He had a long-standing dialogue with Nagano about what the latter divided into "entertainment music" and "art music." This echoed critics disapproving of his "juvenile" or "puerile" songs aimed at young people at the expense of his "serious" classical music. Indeed, it is somewhat unsettling — weird — to hear them sung by operatic voices in 200 Motels (The Suites).

Despite virtual censorship by radio programmers, he did manage two mainstream "hits" — Don't Eat the Yellow Snow (1973) and Valley Girl (1982, with help from Moon Zappa). One of his mottoes was: "Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible."

I don't really understand people who think of art as an antidote to entertainment.
FRANK ZAPPA

A close examination of his output — from fearlessly irreverent rock to classical — reveals it all comes from the same cloth, what Zappa described from the beginning as "conceptual continuity."

"I don't really understand people who think of art as an antidote to entertainment, something that should not give you a pleasurable experience," he told Menn. "It's a strange idea, to me, to think that the more strenuous the experience is, the more artistic it is — like the ugliest picture is the best art. What do you mean? ... The most interminable, grinding composition, even if it's well conceived ... should you be forced to consume it because somebody says it's artistic, or should you consume it because you like it?"

Another misguided canard is that he condescended to his young audience. In fact, his relationship with them was pally, almost familial. (He loved hanging out with his own kids, Moon, Dweezil, Ahmet and Diva — that is, when he wasn't holed up in his home studio working 18-hour days.) His fans understood his humour as they understood his music, crazy or classical.

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